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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 TASHKENT 000531

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SUBJECT: STRANGE AND CONTRADICTIONARY EVENTS: PAVING THE WAY  
FOR EVENTUAL PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION IN UZBEKISTAN

Classified By: Ambassador Richard B. Norland; reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (S) Summary: Cutting oddly across the grain of recent rapprochement with the U.S. and the West, the government of Uzbekistan has taken a number of controlling measures which could simply reflect disregard for our sensibilities on reform or, more likely, portend deeper disarray and looming political turmoil as a post-Karimov transition starts to get underway. Perhaps counter-intuitively, we need to prepare for change by deepening our engagement with Uzbekistan as the best way of enhancing prospects for reform. End Summary.

As Predicted, Relations Improve: Gradually, Step-by-Step --  
Though Still Not Enough

12. (C) President Karimov's April 4 speech to the NATO/EAPC Summit in Bucharest, with his call for a corridor for non-military cargo through Uzbekistan in support of NATO operations in Afghanistan, is only the most dramatic, security-related example of Uzbekistan's recent outreach to the West. This outreach is aimed at balancing off -- but not replacing -- Uzbekistan's close links with Russia, and is consistent with the gradual, step-by-step approach that President Karimov announced to us last September. On the economic front, Uzbekistan recently formed a joint venture with General Motors that will produce Chevrolets for the Central Asian and Russian markets.

13. (C) Even in the toughest area, human rights, Uzbekistan allowed the International Committee of the Red Cross to resume prison visits and released half a dozen human rights activists. Long-time observers of Uzbekistan rightly note that these measures are self-serving. Human rights violations are ongoing and there is an absence of fundamental democratic reform. (Note: we will be toting up the "balance" on recent human rights developments and prospects for progress in a separate cable.)

Yet Level of Control Goes Up

14. (C) However, we must take note when new, oddly negative developments on the reform front -- pressures of a sort not encountered for some time, and inconsistent with the overall mood of rapprochement with the West -- manifest themselves on the Tashkent political scene. For example, the government last month tasked the militia guarding many embassies, including ours, with intensified screening of all Uzbek

visitors, taking down their passport numbers; this causes delays, and the diplomatic corps is working together to seek redress. In the area of cultural exchanges, despite President Karimov's statement to the Ambassador that academic institutions should deal directly with each other without government interference, a promising Arizona State University summer study program in Bukhara was turned down without explanation. Some foreign NGOs carrying out aid programs in Uzbekistan report that the government is now implementing banking regulations in such a way that program funds (as opposed to salaries and expenses) are virtually frozen due to "review" by the authorities. On the commercial front, virtually all foreign companies report greater pressure than ever from shady, influential quarters seeking to cut in on their profits, with no transparency or redress, despite the very public launch on April 11 of a foreign investment guide calling for a less opaque business climate.

15. (C) This harassment has not/not reached crisis levels. At this stage, it represents more of an inconvenience (for example, our militia guards are sheepish about the added scrutiny, and the Foreign Ministry and National Security Service explanations contradict each other). But it constitutes a strange and aggravating cross-current to the steady improvement in relations we have seen in recent months.

What Gives? Pre-Transition Looms as 'Elites' Time May Soon Be Up"

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16. (S) With President Karimov's third term now underway, and amidst recent rumblings on the political "personnel" front, something seems to be afoot. By way of context, we recall the odd episode three months ago when Prime Minister Mirziyayev's successor was announced one evening (as being first deputy Prime Minister Azimov), only to have that announcement revoked the following morning. Similar rumors surfaced on the Internet again more recently, only to once again disappear. The prevailing view is that Tashkent-based Azimov declined the dubious honor of becoming Karimov's heir apparent, feeling he does not yet have his political ducks lined up with Samarkand/Bukhara- or Ferghana Valley-centered rivals whose support is required for stability in Uzbekistan's political triad.

17. (S) We also recall President Karimov's surprising decision to appoint his daughter, Gulnara, a controversial figure with many business rivals and low popularity, as a deputy foreign minister for cultural affairs. Despite her high negatives, the move is now increasingly seen as a first step by the President in grooming his articulate daughter to succeed him as a way of securing family equities (including a safe retirement for Karimov himself).

18. (S) President Karimov has certainly started his third term with a flurry of reformist headlines and plans for long-term economic and social improvement. But lurking in the background is the growing awareness that this is likely to be his last term and growing uncertainty as to how long it will last, whether he will be around afterwards and just what or who might follow him. In an April 25 article translated on the eurasianhome.org website, semi-independent political analyst Rafik Sayfulin touches on the role of Uzbekistan's elites in foreign policy making and, perhaps inadvertently, offers the striking observation that "the elites are well aware that their time may soon be up and their touted elitism will be restricted to a certain street or mahalla (neighborhood)." In a May 6 conversation with the Ambassador, Sayfulin seemed worried that his words might be interpreted as commenting on Karimov's political longevity -- but he did not retract them.

19. (S) Indeed, it appears that a presidential transition

process is slowly starting to take shape. Two essential features mark the start of the game. First: determined steps by the National Security Service (NSS) to make sure that no outside (or internal, for that matter) factors disrupt the process by which the elites try to pick a successor. This is reflected in the new, broad-gauged NSS efforts described in para 4 to control access to embassies and scrutinize NGO financial operations. Second: a fairly brazen, at times seemingly desperate grab by the same elites for portions of the Uzbek economic pie in the face of an uncertain future. This is reflected in the steady drumbeat of complaints from foreign investors, which all but drown out the hopeful noises accompanying the launch of the Uzbek investment guide.

¶10. (S) While Karimov seems to be in good health, he is a 70-year-old product of the Soviet era. He remains articulate on policy matters, on TV and with interlocutors, but there is a rote repetitive quality to his presentations which suggests he is well beyond entertaining new thinking. The economy, fueled by rising commodity prices, is doing well enough to sustain the elites, but it is not creating jobs for the nation's overwhelmingly young population, and thinking technocrats are, we believe, getting worried. The assumption has been that, if Karimov were to leave the political stage tomorrow, key elites (or "clans") would sit down and decide on a successor who can sustain their interests. It is not clear that this assumption is still valid, or at least that the process would be a smooth one. Hence, efforts by the security service to make sure that no unauthorized elements position themselves to take advantage of any possible leadership vacuum. NSS Director Inoyatov is likely the powerful arbiter of the presidential succession game, though he does not appear to want the job himself.

What Does This Mean for Us?

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¶11. (S) Our goal is to develop and sustain a steady path toward reform in a Central Asian society that has never known democracy. The average Uzbek has no interest in a "color revolution," and hence neither do we. But there is a sense of stagnation and frustration in the land. And there are reformers and technocrats in this society who know this and are looking for the opportunity to try new ideas. In the area of human rights, bright young activists are looking at ways to prod the system from within, even as older, Soviet-era activists vent their frustration in calls for sanctions. On the vital economic investment front, the elite clan "ceiling" against which those new ideas will inevitably bump is -- of economic necessity -- capable of some degree of adjustment. This will take time, but it does not have to wait for Karimov's political demise to get started. And, no matter who emerges as the next President of Uzbekistan, there is likely to be (as in neighboring Turkmenistan) a gradual shift away from the Soviet-style approach of the past 17 years.

¶12. (S) We need to be poised to encourage this new environment as it emerges. Counter-intuitively (given the renewed pressures cited above), this means we need to engage more deeply with the Uzbeks -- in those areas where cooperation is possible -- and contain the urge to isolate Uzbekistan in the face of certain ongoing behaviors we find repugnant. Indeed, we must redouble efforts to voice our disapproval effectively and find ways within the existing body politic of Uzbekistan (and they do exist) to stand up for universal values. For example, Karimov's extensive May 2 decree marking the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is widely viewed as empty rhetoric, but the Foreign Ministry has taken us up on our offer to explore ways to implement it meaningfully; we will try to take this opening all the way to the bank. At the same time, we must avoid steps that could undermine potential reformers or alienate public perceptions in Uzbekistan of the

U.S. and the West.

#### Sanctions and Political Transition

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¶13. (S) This raises the question of sanctions, which the EU recently fended off for yet another six months, and which we will have to consider in June in accordance with U.S. legislation. Sanctions which target senior Uzbek leaders personally (such as a visa ban) risk painting them into a corner that will make transition and a soft landing outside the presidential palace that much harder to influence. Sanctions are likely to poison the bilateral environment, meaning that we will lose access to technocrats and potential reformers who won't be able to be seen with us. In contrast to a year ago, these figures are now inviting us to conferences at which forward-looking themes like "human rights and law enforcement," and "security in Central Asia and Afghanistan" are open for input by Western experts and diplomats -- input which appears not to be falling on deaf ears. We are thinking, for example, of people like deputy prosecutor general Sharafutdinov, chamber of commerce and industry chairman Shaikov, and first deputy prime minister Azimov -- people who clearly but cautiously hope the gradually improving atmosphere with the U.S. will give them a chance to advance a more reformist agenda. We are starting to get access to them and they are listening; sanctions would shut this down almost instantly.

¶14. (S) This cable looks at the sanctions issue in the context of presidential transition, and of course there are strictly human rights grounds on which we must also examine the issue, which will be covered septel. Suffice it to say here that while sanctions would be welcomed by some human rights activists, there are other credible figures who view them as ushering in the return of a most unwelcome isolation that would only undermine prospects for progress on reform and human rights. In addition, in terms of public diplomacy, the average Uzbek is likely to be puzzled and disappointed by any sudden turn which resulted in disengagement by the U.S. The Uzbeks want to be able to associate with us normally again. One credible Uzbek observer estimated that if relations stay on track for another five or six months, this

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will be possible.

#### Conclusion

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¶15. (S) To be sure, we will be responding to the recent measures that up the ante as far as the Uzbek government's penchant for control are concerned. But we may not get very far -- these steps were not taken arbitrarily, and if as we suspect they are linked to eventual presidential transition, they will only be eased selectively (we are hearing that pressure on one NGO, Project Hope, may let up next week). However, turning ongoing Uzbek recalcitrance on reform into a crisis in bilateral relations would undermine the small opening that now exists for continued real progress on human rights and other key issues, including Afghanistan. It would also risk our ability to shape the presidential transition that is gradually getting underway and that could suddenly be thrust upon us any day if something were to happen to President Karimov. We should avoid steps that foster isolation, build on the fragile opportunity that exists to nurture reform, and line ourselves up to hit the ground running with the next generation of leadership in Uzbekistan.

NORLAND